

## **The Jurassic Park of Historical Culture**

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Imagine a theme park, full of history and memory creatures, made and controlled by historians, archivists and memory guardians. Suddenly these creatures acquire life, become autonomous, uncontrollable, start to fight each other, and scare the humans. Yet, humans are not innocent victims. They recruit the past phantoms into their power games, give them roles and often borrow their voices. The past acquires life, a second hybrid life. This second life of the past contaminates its first life. It's difficult, if not impossible, for humans to imagine these creatures in their original setting, outside their role in the park.

This fairytale could be adapted to various circumstances. Dead memories or facts acquire suddenly new meaning and become alive, enter the public sphere and become part of political discourse, create strong sentiments of hate or love, colonize our mental geography of the world. It's difficult, and often impossible, to avoid them or to escape.

If Dinosaurs were extinguished by the breaking up of time by asteroids, they acquire a new life by the breaking up of the present time and the changing roles of past and future. Historians acquire a role neither preaching utopias, nor predicting the future, but when the past fills the gap of expectations, after the collapse of the future. The question is what to do and how to understand this Jurassic park of historical culture, and what is the role of historians?

As historians we had (and still have) the illusion that by telling the truth to our audiences we enlighten them and free them from their superstitions, or we assist them to elaborate rationally on their experiences. But this "coming to terms with the past" is not a homogeneous and predictable procedure. There are gaps between the way history is used at an institutional level, in communities, and by individuals. The Jurassic park metaphor is useful for explaining that we come to terms with the past not only through representations of the past, but also with a multiplicity of ways of thinking about the past.

What matters is not only the information about past deeds, but the whole range of the relations with the past. This assertion raises the more general problem of "How to deal with the past in contemporary societies?" and shifts our attention from the question of "What happened in the past?" to the question of "What's happening in the present regarding the past?" This change marks a shift from theorizing history to theorizing historical culture. This shift is necessary for understanding the complexity and the reciprocity of our relations with the past.